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DRAMA AND MUSIC

THE CHICAGO OPERA COMPANY AND ITS MEMORABLE SINGING AND ACTING

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

TEN years ago the opera-going public of New York was asking itself, with some bewilderment and not a little irritation, why it was compelled to travel to the jungles of West Thirty-fourth Street in order to hear the most important lyric-dramas composed since the death of Wagner, and many of the ablest singing-actors then alive, while one of the great opera-houses of the world was contemporaneously open for business and running full blast on Broadway. That golden age of the immortal Hammerstein came to a lamented end. Yet here among us today it is, in many of its essential features, miraculously resurrected before our eyes and ears; and again we are asking ourselves, with increased bewilderment and a little more irritation, why it is that, with the same great and abundantly favored Institution still open for business and running full-blast in our operatic midst, we are compelled to journey to inaccessible urban purlieus in order to hear:

(*Imprimis*) the greatest opera of the last quarter-century, and the chief glory of the lyric stage in France;

(*Item*) a group of the most popularly beloved music-dramas of our time;

(*Item*) the most gifted and versatile singing-actress now living;

(*Item*) the most applauded coloratura singer now living;

(*Item*) the only tenor now living who has commanding excellence both as singer and actor;

(*Item*) a half-dozen other singers who are extraordinarily distinguished and able in both the French and Italian repertoires.

These are puzzling questions, and we shall not pretend

to answer them. It is not, indeed, our business to answer them, even if we knew what the answers are. But every public commentator who is aware of the best that the lyric stage is capable of yielding knows that it *is* his business to ask, and to continue to ask, as long as so preposterous a situation exists. Under present conditions, we are dependent upon the kindly ministrations of an out-of-town organization for many of the richest satisfactions which the operatic stage of our time affords; and that, in the circumstances of our case, is clearly absurd.

But even a limited repast is better than continual deprivation; and so there is not an opera-lover in New York who is not immensely in the debt of Cleofonte Campanini and his Chicago Opera Company, from those who are made happy by hearing again the incomparable *Pelléas et Mélisande* of Debussy to those whose cup of joy is filled to the brim by the captivating procedures of Mme. Amelita Galli-Curci. So we have all been happy, and delightedly applaudive, and perhaps have made glad the heart of Mr. Campanini and his indulgent associates to an extent sufficient to persuade them again to come East and comfort us in our provincialism, reminding us that New York is not, after all, the operatic capital of America.

What are our particular causes for satisfaction and happiness in the Chicago company's too brief stay among us? Well, they are not few. We are happy, first (that is, many of us are), because a shamefully neglected master-work has been restored to the experience of those who loved it and fought for it when, a decade ago, it was esteemed only by a forlorn minority of æsthetic adventurers, who now have the gratification of seeing a formerly undervalued work of rare beauty and genius win at once a public that has finally caught up to it.

Ten years ago we said, speaking of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, that it seemed to us certain that the extraordinary importance of this score as a work of art would compel "an ever-widening appreciation"; because Debussy, looking at these audaciously innovating pages of his, could say with Coventry Patmore, "I have respected posterity." If posterity may be said to foreshadow itself within ten years' time, Debussy has been justified of his presumptive faith in it. The veterans who battled for this work a decade ago, when it was new and, to many, perplexing and futile, should not

be denied their present moment of complacency at the memory of that overflowing and deeply moved audience at the Lexington Theatre the other day which, after the heart-shaking Fourth Act of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, paid so obviously heart-felt a tribute to the genius of Debussy and the eloquence of his interpreters.

As for the impression made by this score, after its long seclusion, upon those who felt its spell in the beginning, let it be said merely that its greatness seemed more certain and secure than ever. As time goes on, it will be less and less needful to insist that this music is the product of one of the most exquisite and scrupulous spirits in the history of art. It is steeped in beauty—beauty of a profoundly original kind; it is saturated in poetic mood; it is fashioned with unchallengeable mastery. Since the enthralling and sovereign voice of Richard Wagner was stilled, none other has spoken out of modern music with so haunting and magical a blend of loveliness and emotion, with such potency of suggestion, with an accent so enchanting and unique.

The exhibition of this unparalleled lyric-drama was the most impressive achievement of the Chicago company's season in New York. Few that witnessed it will forget the indescribable *Mélisande* of Miss Mary Garden—now, as ten years ago, one of the two or three perfect things on the contemporary stage. It was unapproachable then: today it is so superlative in its beauty and puissance that it leaves this amazing artist securely placed among the supreme poetic tragedians of the theatre. A *Pelléas* new to New York, M. Alfred Maguenat, was sincere and impassioned, a figure of touching simplicity and ardor, grave, youthful, nobly romantic. The Golaud of M. Dufranne has always been a superb conveyance; it is still matchless. An admirable Arkel was M. Huberdeau, and the Geneviève of Louise Berat, new to New York, sufficed. M. Marcel Charlier's conducting caused one to long for the memorable insight of Cleofonte Campanini into the secrets of this score. M. Charlier was perhaps misled by the fact that he was confronting music of half-lights and misty contours and shadowy perspectives, and fancied that the right way to deal with it was to smudge it; not realizing that with such music the utmost clarity and precision are essential. He seemed to think that mystical speech must necessarily be blurred and veiled—a common error.

Some inspired moron in the Dark Ages of musical criticism once spoke of the personages in Debussy's opera as "stammering phantoms"; M. Charlier is too sensitive an artist to share permanently a kindred delusion.

We have dwelt upon this revival of *Pelléas* by the Chicago company because it will long remain unforgettable; it was by all odds the finest accomplishment of Mr. Campanini's organization in New York, and would have justified their visit thrice over if they had done nothing else. That they *did* do several other things is abundantly known to the public.

For example, there was Mme. Galli-Curci, generally regarded as the brightest gem in Mr. Campanini's casket of jewels. Of course she is not that. As a lyric interpreter she is not to be named in the same breath with Mary Garden, for while she deals superlatively with trivial material, Miss Garden deals superlatively with great material. Until the violinist who plays exquisitely some pyrotechnical rubbish by Paganini is ranked as the equal of a violinist who can interpret exquisitely the Brahms concerto, it will be fatuous to regard the most applauded achievements of such singers as Mme. Galli-Curci as anything more artistically consequential than a dazzling kind of tonal prestidigitation. It is a difficult and delicate art to balance a chair on one's chin; it is a difficult and delicate art to negotiate the "Mad Scene" in *Lucia*. It must not be forgotten that it is because Mme. Galli-Curci can trill in the neighborhood of high C a few seconds longer than most of her competitors that the operatic public forms in line three blocks away at four o'clock in the afternoon to be among those present when she does it. The much more important fact that Mme. Galli-Curci can sing legato phrases with loveliness of line and color is not the fact that sold out the Lexington Theatre at all her appearances. The fact that hers is a voice of delicious quality—limpid and fresh and sweet in the ear—would not of itself draw fifty people to the box-office at her appearances. Her technique is not impeccable; nevertheless, she is a captivating artist, sensitive in the projection of beautiful tone and the shaping of melodic design. She has dramatic skill. She is admirably simple and genuine in temperament, and altogether engaging as a singing-actress. But let us, for the sake of honesty in our attitude toward the operatic stage, be candid with ourselves in this

matter: If Mme. Galli-Curci were forbidden to sing above the staff, forbidden to disport herself in the florid idiocies of the bravura passages in *Lucia* and *Dinorah*; if she were compelled to abjure record-breaking trills and all other vocal embroidery engrossing merely because of its difficulty; if she were confined to the musico-dramatic interpretation of great parts instead of playing with such antiquated operatic dolls as Lucia and Gilda and Dinorah—would she have created the excitement she has? She performs very beautifully indeed music that is not worth performing at all. We are glad Mr. Campanini has her in his dazzling collection. But we are much gladder that he has Miss Garden; and Lucien Muratore, an unsurpassable artist in his field; and Rosa Raisa, a dramatic soprano of irresistible emotional force; and such masters of histrionic singing as Dufranne and Baklanoff and Dalmores.

It has been a rare pleasure to hear again Charpentier's *Louise* and Massenet's *Juggler*, which are so beloved of our public that they have been carefully excluded from the repertoire of our local Institution—on the principle, no doubt, that it is unwise to indulge the popular taste when it leans away from easily provided satisfactions.

Mr. Campanini permitted us also to hear several novelties. Of these the most interesting was Sylvio Lazzari's *Le Sauteriot*. M. Lazzari is an Austrian by birth, an Italian by parentage, a Frenchman by adoption. The text of *Le Sauteriot* was contrived by Henri Roché and Martial Perrier after a play by E. de Keyserling. Its literary quality is immeasurably above the average, and certain scenes have charm; occasionally there is deep poetic feeling. As a whole, however, it is diffuse, it is loosely articulated, it is much too long, and a good deal of it is, on the stage, dull and ineffective—for example, the greater part of the first act. Ruthlessly condensed, rewritten with a more realistic eye to dramatic values, it might be made a touching and admirable thing.

And M. Lazzari's music would be helped by courageous deletions. Surely he cannot be unaware of the amazing extent to which he has helped himself from the score of *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Almost every one, these days, is permitted to admire Debussy in this convenient and practical way; but M. Lazzari is altogether too bland in his apparent assumption that he can saturate his music in essence-of-*Pelléas* and

get away with it successfully in a community that, musically, is not altogether simple-minded. M. Lazzari has feeling and dramatic instinct, and, on the whole, fine taste; but we beseech him to stop leaning on his confrère, to stand manfully on his own legs and sing bravely his own songs, if he has any to sing—and we think he has. This score of his has beauty and passion; if it were less obviously derivative, we should have high hopes of him. At all events, Mr. Campanini is to be praised for letting us hear it in the very effective performance achieved (under the composer's direction) at the Lexington Theatre.

We have also added to our mental furnishings, thanks to Mr. Campanini (and to the truly magnificent Miss Rosa Raisa as heroine), an experience of Mascagni's *Isabeau*, an opera which, though composed a decade ago, was unknown to New York. There is opportunity now for only a word concerning this composition; but it should at least be recorded without postponement that, though hampered by an incoherent and clumsy libretto,—based by Luigi Illica upon the legend of Lady Godiva's spectacular canter,—Mascagni has been able to produce a score written with dignity, with largeness of utterance, with refinement of craftsmanship. *Isabeau* sets his capacities in a new light. It lacks high distinction; it has many dull and barren intervals; but at its best it holds and imposes.

A new American opera has been staged for us by Mr. Campanini: Mr. Henry Hadley's *Azora*. It was amiable and commendable of Mr. Campanini to go to the very considerable trouble of mounting *Azora*—if mediocre operas *must* be given merely because they are American. But we are not going to discuss *Azora*; for we prefer to conclude this thank-offering to the Chicago Opera Company upon a note of unsullied gratitude.

Sirs and Madams from Chicago, we of New York salute you. You have immeasurably enriched the winter of our operatic discontent.

LAWRENCE GILMAN.